Center for Modern Greek Studies

Greek American Oral History Project
Transcription

Tape:

Subject: Tom Karas
Third Party:
Interviewer: Christos Kanakis
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CD 1, Track 01
{0:00}

I: This is Christos Kanakis from San Francisco State, interviewing Tom Karas. Mr. Karas, could you please introduce yourself.

T: Thank you. My name is Tom Karas, or in Greek it's Anastasios Evangelou Karamouzos <check spelling {0:11}>. I was born Jaunary 11, 1941 in the village of Kouli Kargia Argos <check spelling {0:25}>.

I: Okay, Mr. Karas could you please describe Greece at the time you were there?

T: The uh time of—which I was in Greece—my young years was difficult times. At that time Mussolini had come to Greece to take over. And they could not do that and so the Germans came through, and after we had very hard-difficult civil war over there. At that time my father, in 1943, was uh captured by or taken by the communist with 3,000 other villagers from our area and they were taken to Fidalo <check spelling {1:20}>. Uh and there were staged St. George Monastery and from there they were taken up across from the moanastery to a cave and they would slaughter them and uh. And that was the way to get rid of them, by throwing them inside the cave. The cave was very deep. The cave was founded by a shepherd, because at the beginning the communists were killing them and throwing them into the ravines. The ravines they were throwing them here was not very healthy to throw them in the ravines. The shepherd said, "Hey, I know a cave you can put them in." And he showed them were the cave was, and to make sure that he was not lying they threw him in and he was not able to come out. So they knew it was good place get rid of all the people they were to slaughter.

I: What was the situation with you family and how did the idea of coming to America—

T: Oh, and the other thing is, excuse me for not completing it. My father was actually going to the Metropolis for uh priest studies that he had to have to be able to be a priest. And he was leaving the village and going maybe to Argos. Maybe the communists thought he was saying things, spying on them. And that was one of the reasons they didn't like him. And the other thing is, the communists didn't like people of letters.

I: And so how did—what was your family's situation and um did they want to leave Greece?

T: Yeah at that time everybody in Greece was very depressed. Were very hungry. We didn't have anything there was no food. There was uh—people were starving. So people, if they could get a means of leaving Greece, to go anyplace so they could survive, they would do that. Or they had a relative and

they would make a petition for them to go there. Or maybe there was an opening to go to Canada or the United States or Australia. <unintelligible {4:05}> my father was killed a few years later. My uncle was the oldest brother of my father. He was here in the United States, it was 1950 about, and when he found out that we were left orphans with my father being killed. He made a petition to bring us to the United States. So he made the petition and we made our papers. And in 1951, he came to Greece and he took us to the United States. That was in uh September 15, 1951, we left Greece.

I: What was going in your mind on the ship? On—

T: Well the hardest thing was that me and my brother, Bill, were coming to the United States and we left my mother behind with my sister, Evangalia <check spelling {5:02}>. So it was very difficult for two young boys to leave their mother and sister and come to the United States. It was heart breaking uh experience, but there was no other way so we came to United States to be better.

I: Could you describe Ellis Island and coming on—

T: <unintelligible {5:26}> I remember from it. On the boat called "Nea Ellas" <check spelling {5:29}> coming from Greece. And I'd never been on a boat in my life and it was a very hard ride in the ocean. We stopped in uh Canada, Kalfax <check spelling {5:45}> I believe it was. And from there we kept to New York, and I do not remember too much. I was very sick coming over here. And then we stayed two days in New York, in New Jersey—we had some relatives over there—with my uncle. And then after our stay there, we came across country on a train to Oakland. And from Oakland, we came to San Francisco on a ferry boat.

I: How did you decide to come to San Francisco from the—

T: Well the uncle that brought us here to the United States, they lived in San Francisco, in the Sunset district.

I: How old were you at the time?

T: In 1951, when I came over here, I was eleven-years-old and my brother was seven, seven-eight around there he was.

End of CD 1, Track 01
{6:36}
Beginning of CD 1, Track 02

I: Mr. Karas, in terms of your educational background, could you describe it?

T: Uh yes. In Greece I went to the village school, which was a one room school and it had all the grades from 1st grade to the 6th grade grammar school. And I had four years of education in the Greek school in Greece. There was one teacher who would teach the whole class, all the grades. And then when I came to the United States in 1951, I started uh school and I went to grammar school and I went to high school and uh that was 12 years of education I had.

I: Do you remember the names of the school?

T: Uh yes, but I went to the grammar school was Francis Scott Peid <check spelling {0:53} of San Francisco. And junior high school was APG Anili <check spelling {1:02}>. And high school, I went to Lincoln High School. That was my <unintelligible {1:10}> education. And then after I finished my education, the 12th grade, I signed up to go to the United States Army. That was 19—uh '60, January 1960, and I was drafted three months later. <background noise>.

End of CD 1, Track 02
{1:35}
Beginning of CD 1, Track 03

I: Mr. Karas, how did your family support itself at the time?

T: Yes, my aunt and uncle were semi-retired. They had a business and they rented it, the building, and they were receiving rents. And uh that was until 1955. And after 1955, my uncle took back the business. And he opened it up as a grocery store that was in the Sunset District. And the uncle and the aunt and we helped him run the uh convenience market at that time. And I was there after school, and after school I would come uh three o'clock in the afternoon and help until they were closing in the evening, nine o'clock. And that was everyday of the week. And also trying to do our school work. And that went on until I graduated High School in 19—uh end of 1959, '60.

End of CD 1, Track 03
{1:20}
Beginning of CD 1, Track 04

T: And the store that my uncle had was between 47th and 48th Avenue, on Noriega Street, all the way down by the beach. And there I, until I went to the army, I was working there. And in the army, I went in the beginning of next March 1960, and I stayed in the service, actually it was supposed to be a six-month service in the reserves. And then you come out and they go to reserve duty. But what happened at that time, a year or so later, they had the Cuban Crisis and they kept us in for another extra year in the service. So by the time I finished service I was already a couple years in. And when I got out of the service, I worked for my uncle until 1970. In the meantime in 1966, I went to Greece for a vacation and that's where I met my wife and we got married.

And then she came—we came together in the fall—we got married in the fall, close to wintertime. And yeah, we lived close to the store on 48th Avenue and Noriega. And I worked until 1970 there, and then my first cousin, Andy Angelopoulos <check spelling {1:42}> purchased the grocery department at 22nd and Irving Market, was for sale. So he purchased the grocery department. And then a few months later, it wasn't long—about two, three months later—the produce department came up for sale because they uh owner that had the produce department, <unintelligible {2:10}>, had a heart attack and uh it was for sale by his daughter and son. So that's when I came in and I bought the produce department. So we went in partners with Andy Angelopous. And ever since that time, I had been at 22nd and Irving Market.

I: What was the year when you purchased?

T: 1970.

I: 1970.

T: Yes, the uh, Andy had bought the grocery department which was a three department store at that time. It had the produce department separate in the front. It had the grocery department in the back and it also had a meat department. So, and the produce department, it was the master lease holder, so when I came in we bought the produce department and we got the master lease. So that makes things so that we can control the store. And ever since I've been in here until 1999, in the year 2000, Andy retired and I kept the store until now and I'm still here on 22nd and Irving Market. In the Meantime we had all these years, we changed the store to only a fruits and vegetables and ethnic items.

I: And you took over Andy Angelopoulos's share?

T: Yes, yes I took Andy's share in the year 1999 and 2000 it was. And he retired, he was three years older than I and I kept the store.

End of CD 1, Track 04
{3:56}
Beginning of CD 1, Track 05

I: Mr. Karas, can you um go back to the time when you brought over your sister and your mother?

T: Uh yes, in 1965, I brought my mother to the United States on—around Christmas time. That was in 1965. And after she came to the United States, I uh went to Greece on vacation in 1966 in the month of June with a cousin of mine from Australia that had come to the United States. And we were both going to Greece to vacation, and we find, we were lucky—happened to find a

girl that we liked and we would get married that we take back, him to Australia and me to the United States. So we went to Greece, he went first in June, and I went a couple weeks later. I first went to Germany and then I came down to Germany and Austria and Yugoslavia, Thessaloniki and I met my cousin there and from there, we traveled down South. I stopped the first girl I was introduced to was in Kalabaka. A friend of ours <unintelligible {1:26}> was in the United States, and my uncle said if you found a girl, you have to give them a little gift. So the gift was to give it to them and family. Show me, or see their uh niece. So anyway that was the first stop there, and from there we came to Athens, and then from Athens, we went to Argos. And then while in Argos, at this time, I stayed there all summer and everybody had a girl for me. Their nieces or some relative said "I got a good girl." Everybody had a good girl for me. But what happened was September had come around and it had made me dizzy because everyone had a girl for me and I was all confused. And I said no, I'm gonna live and go to the United States. Then Kostas and Argo said, "You know, I have a girl that you have to see." In the meantime, I said, "Okay." I went and saw the girl and they offered us that evening <unintelligible {2:50}> sweet um fruit and we talked. The next day I said, "You know, I like her," and she responded by saying, "I like the boy too." So that weekend came up and we had made the engagement out <unintelligible {3:03}> and then the following week we had the wedding. And so we got married the 18th of September 1966. We went on the Honeymoon, Evian, on the island Nisiou Neron <check spelling {3:20}>, which my brother-in-law that led to her sister—two brother-in-laws who were married through her two sisters—and they made arrangements and we went their for our honeymoon. Then we came back and we started the process of preparing all the papers for my wife to come to the United States. So after a couple of months we got all the paper work straightened out. So we came to the United States with a wife and also we had a little dog in Greece, which I had purchased in Germany and uh we came over here to the United States before Thanksgiving. And we came on the Olympia ship to New York and then we went to Canada to see my lost brother. He was in Canada at that time. Then we came and go cross country, and uh we got here on Thanksgiving in San Francisco. And we came to San Francisco, our mother—my mother was with us, and then we had a uh—we made a petition to bring my sister, my niece, and her husband. And they came to the United States—maybe it was around March of 1967. And they had been here since then. When I was in Greece, I had one problem. I had come over here young, which is eleven-years-old is not really real young, but it's enough that if your relatives and they don't speak much English in the house because they want you to learn—I mean they don't speak much Greek in the house because you—they uh want you to learn English. In the meantime, all this time, I had forgotten the Greek writing, reading, and speaking. And it was a little difficult in Greece. So you left kind of Americanized in Greece. It was—but uh then when after I got married the wife, she taught me the Greek.

I: How do you feel now, today, to you feel more Greek-American or more Greek?

T: Well I feel Greek-American, I think one of the hardest things in your life is when you love two countries, the country in which you were born and the country that fed you. So it's—you have two countries which you like both but you still love our heritage. We like our roots.

I: What would you teach future generations you think is most important to teach your grandchildren?

T: There's nothing wrong to know the country you live in, their history, and their language here. But also it's good to know your roots. Also there's nothing wrong by knowing the history of the country which we come from, which it has such a deep history and such deep knowledge which everything involved the revolved around everything in Greek history. Because it's the Greek history is the uh—those people at that time gave us the light and gave us knowledge, which is hard to find in other countries or any other nationality—those kinds of roots.

End of CD 1, Track 05
{7:33}
Beginning of CD 1, Track 06

I: How has religion played a role in your life?

T: Well, in Greece everybody is born Orthodox, and it's natural. And then also in Greece, my family we come from—every generation had a priest in the family. One of my great-great-grandfather was priest and that point from there, there was another priest in the family and then further in the generation, which my father's brother-in-law, he was the one to become a priest. My father didn't quite make it because of the circumstances in Greece at that time you could be killed by the communists. So he didn't have the opportunity to practice priesthood. So at that time it stopped and then we came to the United States, and my uncle and aunt would take us to church on the major holidays only. Then in 1966 when I got married with my wife, she was very religious and—

I: Did you go to Holy Trinity on 7th Street?

T: We had gone there. When we first came to the United States, we had gone to the Holy Trinity Church and we went to the Enunciation Church in 14th and Valencia, and other churches for a wedding or a baptism. And in 1966 when I got married the wife—we had started a family—and from that time on, we were very involved in our church. We uh—then in 1970 we had moved also

to Sonoma. And at that time—Marin County didn't have—they had just begun to start a church up there. We didn't have a church, so we had services at different halls at uh—before the Nativity of Christ was built—the last place before that we used St. Vincent's Catholic Church for our services and uh in Marin County. And then in 1980-82, then we built the Nativity of Christ, all the parishioners of Marin County built the church there, the Nativity of Christ Church, and then we were very involved with the Church helping. Our children were involved in the Church activities, the Greek dancing, the agora, and in 1987 we moved back to San Francisco. And when we moved back to San Francisco, our girls by being in the dance group they started at Holy Trinity, because they didn't have—Holy Trinity did not have a dance group. Their friends all danced at Enunciation. But when we came down here, the girls, their friends in San Francisco, they started the dance group at Holy Trinity with Father Anthony Kosturos.

I: Was that when Holy Trinity was on Brotherhood Way? Or before that?

T: This is 1987, this was at the new church on Brotherhood Way. Uh and then we started the Greek Orthodox folk dance group there and our son, he participated in Enunciation. Then he had his friends his age, they were at Enunciation and then after we got the group started there. My whole life is very involved—we started other groups also. And my son also started going to Holy Trinity. And I believe in 1987 at Holy Trinity on Brotherhood Way, and in 19—after moving down here, I remember becoming a parish council member for the board there with Father Anthony Kosturos. And then again in 19—exactly I don't remember—around 1994 or 1995, I was the Vice President. And then in a year or so or two years later, I had become the president of Holy Trinity until present time, 2006 now. And we have been always involved here in the church activities and church oriented. The only thing the church teaches is good things. There's nothing bad there.

End of CD 1, Track 06
{5:31}
End of Interview